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## A Comparison Study of Wedding Between China and Western Countries

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### Abstract

Since ancient times, wedding custom, as a national symbol and cultural development, plays a very important role in the ethnic studies. More importantly, it is that people can understand the history of human society better through numerous and brilliant wedding customs and explore the basic law of development of human society. During the development of human history, many wedding customs have experienced various changes, as the basic pattern, “six etiquettes” in China has not changed much and is still essential and core in wedding custom. In western countries, a valid marriage should experience proposal, surnames, choosing the day and holding the wedding. This paper will explore some different aspects of two wedding customs. Because of their different cultural origin, religion, concept and geography, there are many differences existing between China and Western countries: different procedures, different dresses, different activities, different colors and different wedding day ceremonies. Because of the cultural exchange, China and Western countries become more frequent. This paper will also discuss some similarities and absorption of wedding culture between China and Western countries. Through the comparison of these processes and some related stories, we can easily find the distinctions. Generally speaking, western weddings are more flexible. The processes of a wedding are not so complicated as a Chinese wedding. They give us the impression of romanticism, freedom and equity. According to the traditional Chinese style, it seems to be more cockamamie and striped-pants but own deeper cultural connotations.

**Key words:** Wedding customs; Differences; Similarities; Absorption of wedding culture

### INTRODUCTION

Chinese people once thought that marriage was a kind of way to increase families, offspring and it can protect and enhance family's reputation and position. Marriage would add a girl of a clan other than one's own, so marriage was looked at the important event of the family but not one's own matter. The love between the man and the woman was not the first condition of marriage. Today the marriage concepts have not changed much especially in some backward places. The purpose of getting married for them is still to increase families, offspring and protect and enhance family's reputation and position. On the side of western countries, marriage is the result of love. The aim of marriage is to make the woman and the man live together all the life, looking for long-term life partner. It is the personal affair. They have no duty to increase family, offspring and protect and enhance family's reputation and position. The Western Society always pays attention to individual independence, therefore, westerners' self-centeredness and independent consciousness is strong, and individualism is popular in Western society. Marriage is based on love and harmony. In their view: A marriage without love is immoral, low quality of the marriage. Thus, those westerners stress feeling not the family's interest or reputation when they are choosing a lover. According to the American public opinion experts Lewis Harris' statistics, 83% of American men think that love is the first condition of marriage, is also the essential motive. More 90% of Americans believe. The first condition of maintaining marriage is love. Thus, the pursuit of true love is the most important purpose of marriage for most westerners.

Because of the influence of cultural origin, concept, religion, and geography, there are mainly five different aspects: different procedures, different marriage media, different dresses and different purposes. With the development of society, with the amalgamations of two worlds, with the society's progress and the transformation of people's thinking, there still exist some similarities. At all times and in all countries, the wedding ceremony is considered to be the greatest ritual of anyone's entire life. The atmosphere created during the wedding is invariant - being ceremonious, enthusiastic, jubilant and lucky.

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## 1. THEORY BASIS

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### 1.1 Cultural Origin

Traditional Chinese marriage custom was influenced by a distinctive patriarchal clan system. "Three obedience and four virtues" decided that women should become an appendage to the men and be subordinated to the family interest. "Their parents' orders, by matchmakers' help". The youth didn't have the right their spouse. It was also characterized by strong feudal political color. Marriage sometimes was a kind of way to all in politics. The policy of connecting friendly relations through political marriages was a typical example in history. The traditional marriage custom was influenced deeply by Confucianism. However, western marriage custom is influenced deeply by religion, which emphasizes both men and women are God's sons and daughters, they have an equal right to choose companions, so they are equally unlike Chinese who pay more attentions to boys. Western people consider girls are also the fruit of love.

### 1.2 Religion

Among all the religion by which people seek to worship, Christianity is the most influential in the west. Every stage of man's life is affected by this religion, so that it has become part and parcel of Western culture. Christianity thought that the marriage is established by god, it is holy, solemn and forever agreement. "The Garden of Eden was the church, God is the host, Adam and Eve became monogamous marriage, which is according to Christian." For example, British dominant religious belief is Christian faith or rather the U.K. is a country of Christianity. Bishop ordered marriage law as the fourth chapter in 1234. After carrying out the law, it was carried on under the strong church control. In 1917, the marriage law referred: the wedding ceremony should be held by priest or at least two witnesses; the willing should be true and not be forced. On the other hand, most Chinese people believes Buddhism, which advocates "why and because relationship". In this point of view, sky is the reason, and Earth is the result; parents are the reason, and sons or daughters are the result; husband is the reason, and wife is the result.

### 1.3 Geography

As we know, China's geography is extremely varied and complex, including mountains, plateaus, plains, grasslands, basins, hills, islands, desert, glaciers, and frozen earth. Mountain areas cover about two-thirds of the total land area. This geography decides that Chinese people live mainly by farming and live in groups, and then formed the patriarchal clan system with rigidly stratified. This makes Chinese people respect the person that exists in objective reality that is the ancestors that created tribe and saved the country. Western geography is not so complex as China. Take Britain as an example. Britain is over one thousand kilometers from south to north. Its coastline runs about ten thousand kilometers, making it one of the countries with the longest coastlines in the world. In Britain no place is over one hundred and twenty kilometers from the sea. During the fight with the sea, British people feel the strong force of the nature that is too difficult to control. Thus they believed God. They think God is all-powerful and they respect God very much. Chinese people respect ancestors who take the main position and Western people respect God that in western religion take the main position, lead the spirit world. Thus it causes marriage differences.

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## 2. THE DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES IN WEDDING CUSTOM BETWEEN CHINA AND WESTERN COUNTRIES

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### 2.1 The Differences in Wedding Custom

As time goes by, although many wedding customs have experienced various changes, there are five differences between the two kinds of wedding custom. Firstly, the procedures are different. Second, different wedding media, wedding media in China is matchmaker, but priest in western countries. Third, youths have no free right to choose their lover in China, but in western countries people are much freer on this point. At last, the main purpose of getting marriage in China is to continue the male offspring. However, in western countries, there are three purposes: The couple serve God; then get married and start career; last is producing an heir to carry on the pious descendants. The differences existing in Chinese and western marriage custom are inevitable.

### 2.2 Different Procedures

As marriage is one of the social systems, so human beings must follow a set of standardized procedures during the formation of marriage. Wedding ceremony is the ritual when people have to establish interpersonal relationship according to specification. As E. A. Westermarck says "the ritual which relates to marriage, usually include a series of ceremony and no-no." In China, marriage has gone through for a long time. As a most grand etiquette,

it has always been paid a high degree of attention. In our traditional marriage custom, the core content of Han nationality marriage custom followed "Their parents' orders, by matchmakers' help." In the ancient times, it was very important to follow a basic principle of Six Etiquettes, since they are essential to a marriage. Six Etiquettes begin with the Proposal, an elaborate marriage proposal and acceptance. This process was traditionally placed in the hands of a matchmaker, who acted as a buffer between the two parties. This role is much like that of today's real estate agent. Then is birthday matching, through the go-between, the family of the groom will ask for the bride's "Eight Letters", which will accurately represent the bride's birth date. The groom's family would place the "Eight Letters" on the ancestral altar for three days, during the time they hoped there would be no inauspicious omens. The groom's parents would give the information to an astrological expert to conform that the young woman and their son would make a good match. This fortune telling master could presumably determine whether the two match each other. Only after both outcomes were favorable, would be the two families arrange to meet face-to-face to each other. If both were pleased with the outcome of the meeting, they would proceed to the betrothal. The formal Betrothal process begins with both sets of parents exchanging family credentials as tokens of intent, the two families would determine the sum of money and goods that would make up the gift to the girl's family. The groom's family will pick out a "good day" to send the bride's family a variety of bridal gift. Then, several days after receiving the betrothal gifts, the girl's family would send carries with an inventoried dowry to the boy's home. This engagement period might have lasted for a year or two. The next procedure is presenting wedding gifts. After the betrothal letter and betrothal gifts are accepted, the bridegroom's family will later formally send wedding gifts to the bride's family, which depends on local customs and family wealth. After preparing these works well, then the groom's family and even the girl's parents will choose a big day to hold the ceremony. The last procedure is holding the wedding ceremony on a big day. In western country, there also are some procedures—proposal, changing names, choosing a marriage day, and holding the ceremony. During these procedures, many details are different from China. In the West, people choose a spouse, the decision is usually based on feelings of love. If Men and women want to marry, they must first propose by the groom's family to the bride's side, when proposing the groom's family should bestow the betrothal ring to the bride's side, it is called an engagement ring. Thus, when the people mentioned "He gave her a ring", it means that he proposed to her, she accepted, and they are now engaged. Then changing surnames, it was thought unlucky for a woman to marry a man whose surname began with the same letter as hers. The sentiment was summarized in

the following: To change the name and not the letter is to change for the worst and not the better. The bride should not practice writing her new name before the wedding. This was thought to bring bad luck by tempting fate. The next is choosing the day. Although most weddings now take place on Saturdays, it was considered unlucky in the past. Fridays were also considered unlucky, Tuesday for health, Wednesday for the best day of all, Thursday for losses, Monday for wealth. It is very important for them to choose a big day according to their custom. So after that follows the preparation for wedding. Engagement's men and women should consider immediately their wedding plan. According to the tradition, bride's family bears the majority of wedding ceremony expense, bridegroom family is responsible for the feast and other costs. The wedding ceremony in the Western country is a very important situation. In the first several weeks, the relatives and friends will be sent to the invitation letters. The church ceremony in the middle ages took place outside the church door before entering the church for a nuptial mass. During the ceremony in front of the church doors the man stood on the right side and the woman stood on the left side, facing the door of the church. "The reason was that she was formed out of a rib in the left side of Adam." The priest began by asking if anyone knew of any reason the couple should not be married. He also asked this of the man and woman so they might confess any reasons for prohibiting their marriage. All in all, the ceremony is full of mystery and happiness.

### 2.3 Different Dresses

Turn to the ancient China, rough scuffs usually only wear their better clothes, while carriage trades always dress the very beautiful attire called phoenix coronet and robes of rank. At first, this kind of attire is only belonging to the nobles because the phoenix embroidered on it. In Chinese culture, the Chinese dragon and phoenix are the symbol of the imperial power of authority. As time goes on, it becomes common among the rich as it also means wealth and auspicious. But both brides will use the red veil to hide their faces before the wedding night. We can also find that Europe will wear veils (which are white) too. In the modern times, the main wedding attires is Tang suit and cheongsam if the new couple wants to hold a traditional wedding ceremony. However, although the form of a wedding gown in China has changed with time, a very important feature has been kept. It is easy to find that all the clothes are red. Even nowadays many young people trend to choose a white wedding gown, they must put on something red like red flowers. Western wedding cultures have some special requirements for the bride's dressing on the wedding ceremony. An ancient nursery rhyme about something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue is now an important part of most Western European weddings, even though many brides and grooms no longer know the significance of the rhyme. Something

old is symbolic of continuity. The old item was often a piece of lace or a grandmother's scarf or an old piece of jewelry. Something new signifies hope for the future, and can be anything from a piece of clothing for the wedding band itself. Something borrowed is symbolic of future happiness and is often provided by a happily married friend of the bride. And finally, something blue. In ancient times, blue was the color of purity and often both the bride and the groom wore a band of blue cloth around the bottom of their wedding attire. In America, the bride also takes 6 pence which means wealth.

Furthermore, the white wedding gown is the most popular dressing among western people. Prior to the 16th century, however, this most important Western European wedding tradition was not common. It wasn't until Anne of Brittany popularized the white wedding dress in 1499 that the tradition became part of Western European wedding culture. In England, up until the 1400's, the bride usually wore her best dress regardless of the color. It was Queen Victoria (1840) who began the present day fashion of wearing white as the wedding dress. It is also considered unlucky for the bride to make her own wedding dress. Rather than Chinese brides who always make their own wedding attire in history, English brides usually consider it unlucky to make one for themselves.

## 2.4 Different Purposes

In both traditional and modern society, wedding ceremony is an integral part in the formation of relationships. However, there are different purposes between China and West. The main purpose of getting marriage in China is to continue the male offspring. The so-called "there are three forms of filial impiety, of which the most serious is to have no heir" reflects the importance to serve ancestors. And filial piety is traditional virtues.

While, in western countries, religion, especially Christianity is deeply rooted in their minds. They think that it is God who has created marriage. There are three purposes of marriage created by God. First, couples become lifelong companion with each other; they serve God together. Then when they get married, they will start their careers and produce an heir to carry on the pious descendants. The final purpose is carrying on the pious descendants to service to God. So they do not stress the blood relationship. They can remedy the defect of non-child by adopting other children.

## 2.5 Different Activities

After the wedding feast, there are many activities in not only the western wedding but also in the Chinese wedding. In China, the second most exciting thing is to tease the newlyweds on the wedding night. During this time, the good friends, brothers and sisters of the bride and the groom may come into their house and play games and jokes on the newlyweds, especially the bride. They may find many means to make the bride feel embarrassed

while make all the others laugh enough. For instance, they may order the bride to treat the groom as a slave, even give a tool to her to hit him. It may last until 1 or 2 am the next day. So the wedding night is the first challenge which needs to cooperate for the Chinese newlyweds. This custom can date back to thousand years ago. But people in that time do this only to exorcise. Certainly, the parents will throw some candy on their bed, especially the jujubes, peanuts, longan and sunflower seeds. Besides, they will bring some strong and healthy kids to lie on the bed which means the wish to have a strong and healthy child.

In Western culture, the custom of a newlywed couple going on a holiday together originated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Great Britain, a concept borrowed from the Indian elite, in the Indian Subcontinent. Upper-class couples would take a "bridal tour", sometimes accompanied by friends or family, to visit relatives that had not been able to attend the wedding. The practice soon spread to the European continent and was known as English-style voyage, in France from the 1820s on. Honeymoons in the modern sense (i.e. a pure holiday voyage undertaken by the married couple) became widespread during the Belle Époque, as one of the first instances of modern mass tourism. This came about in spite of initial disapproval by contemporary medical opinion (which worried about women's frail health) and by *savoir vivre* guidebooks (which deplored the public attention drawn to what was assumed to be the wife's sexual initiation). The most popular honeymoon destinations at the time were the French Riviera and Italy, particularly its seaside resorts and romantic cities such as Rome, Verona or Venice. Typically honeymoons would start on the night they were married, with the couple leaving midway through the reception to catch a late train or ship.

However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many couples will not leave until 1-3 days after the ceremony and reception in order to tie up loose ends with the reception venue and/or visit with guests from the reception.

## 2.6 Different Colors

In fact, we can distinguish Chinese wedding and western wedding of the color. In China, red is symbolic of luck, wealth, health, life and happiness, while white means death, sorrow, sadness and loss. Then Chinese will adorn everything red in a wedding ceremony. To the contrary, red in western countries usually means to bleed, fire, revenge and death. Besides, they take white as the symbol of virginity and purity so that everything the brides wear and everything appears on the wedding should be white. Sometimes, English and American choose yellow because it means Cupid.

## 2.7 Different Wedding Day Ceremonies

Wedding ceremonies in western countries always seem to be more romantic and solemn. Generally, people, for

example, Italians will hold their ceremony in a church and hosted by a priest so that they can get the blessing and approval from God. On that day, the bride comes into the church accompanied by her father, taking some white flowers and wearing her wedding gown and veil. The bridegroom is in black suit, standing by the priest. Now the music called *Wedding Chorus* is on. After the father gives the bride's hand to the lucky man, the priest will announce the marriage statement: Will you take the woman (man) to be your lawful wedded wife (husband) to live together in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you love her (him), cherish her (him), keep her (him), honor her (him) in sickness, in health, forsaking all others, and cleave only to her (him) so long as both shall live?

If both of the bride and groom say "yes, I do", the minister will allow them to change their rings and kiss each other. Then the minister pronounces them to be husband and wife and gives his blessing. Then the music changes to bright melody called *Wedding Overture*.

Compared to the western wedding ceremony, traditional Chinese weddings procedures are not so simple. After all, the culture of China has continued more than 5000 years. Firstly, when the groom goes to take the bride to the ceremony, her family members or friends will set many challenges. For example, they may close the door until the groom gives some gifts called *Hongbao*. Besides, they may hide the bride or her shoes and so on. All are done to show the attachment bond with the bride and make the man know how hard to get married with the bride so that he must cherish her. During the wedding ceremony day, Chinese will hold the Three-blows which we call *Baitang*: One for the ancestors, one for the parents and one for each other. This is the first most exciting moment in the ceremony. It is an epitome of the main stream value of Chinese culture. In traditional Chinese culture, the moral virtue plays a very important role in society and family life.

### 3. THE SIMILARITIES IN WEDDING CUSTOM BETWEEN CHINA AND WESTERN COUNTRIES

#### 3.1 The Same Meaning of Wedding Ring

A **wedding ring** is almost always placed on a ring bearer pillow during the wedding ceremony. For the real wedding rings, the **wedding rings** are sewn or tied on the pillows. The ring bearer pillows have its origin that date back from the Roman and Egyptian old traditions. During those times, the pillow was used to carry silver and gold stones. Today, at wedding ceremonies, the pillow carries the cherished **wedding rings**. It is traditional for a couple to exchange wedding rings after they say their vows during the wedding ceremony itself. Since these rings are symbols of the marriage, the words said during

a ring exchange should reflect the couple's hopes for their marriage. These words may be simply included into the wedding vows, or done as a separate ceremony. Because the wedding rings are so symbolic to couples, great care must be taken into choosing the best one that will symbolize all your hopes and dreams for your marriage. Choosing your rings can be a very exciting time in your life. Your wedding ring, as we said before, will be a symbol of your love that you and your partner will wear for a very long time. Ladies will often find it easier to choose a wedding ring than men do, and there are a few reasons for this. One, ladies are often more familiar with jewelry terminology than men. This makes the whole experience a little less stressful and confusing for a lady than it is for men. Also, ladies have often had the advantage of seeing wedding rings of friends' and contemporaries in their social groups. Women will often already have an idea of the kind of wedding ring that they would like to have someday.

More importantly, an engagement ring is given to the lady before the wedding ring. Ideally, the wedding ring should compliment the engagement ring, rather than take attention away from it. This doesn't mean the wedding ring needs to be characterless. It simply means that a lady must choose a wedding ring that will flatter their engagement ring design. It should be a ring that looks like it was constantly meant to be with your engagement ring, just as a wife is always meant to be with her husband. Both in China and Western countries, the **wedding rings** embody the continuous flow of love, a circle that symbolizes eternity where there is no beginning and no end. It is believed that love moves around endlessly in circles for better or worse. It is an appropriate sign for the true meaning of marriage. The ring unites the married couple through happy or sad times. Some people take extra precautions in selecting the **wedding ring** from its purchase to its care, believing the superstition that it is bad luck to buy the wedding ring and the engagement at the same time. No matter what the beliefs are, couples deciding to marry will always focus on the positive—that the **wedding ring** is a symbol of never-ending love and devotion between husband and wife.

#### 3.2 The Same Important Symbol of Wedding in Chinese and Western Countries' Culture

With the development of society, with China's accession to WTO, China and Western countries become more frequent in the economic and cultural exchanges, so there are also some similarities between them. Wedding ring is an important symbol of the marriage. In the old china, they don't have rings in their marriage, they would choose something special as the symbol, but nowadays, both sides choose a wedding ring and they will prepare it before the wedding ceremony. During the typical ceremony, the bride and groom exchange identical wedding rings. The ring, a circle with no beginning and no end, symbolise unending

love and loyalty. It is worn on the fourth finger of the left hand because of a very old idea that a vein or nerve runs from this finger directly to the heart.

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#### 4. THE ABSORPTION OF WEDDING CULTURE BETWEEN CHINA AND WESTERN COUNTRIES

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Nowadays, as a result of cultural exchange, many young people in China are eager to choose western wedding style, and many western people choose Chinese traditional style. For example, in China, the couple forsake some unnecessary conventional rules and pursue modern open ways. The matchmaker is no longer so important, the youth chooses their spouse for their love. After engagement, they will be busy with the preparation for the wedding, which mostly is decided by themselves. With western modern furnitures in their new family, while some others will still remain the traditional Chinese style. Both Chinese and Western people make a good choice according to their interest.

On the hand of the wedding dress, both Chinese and western would like to choose white marriage gauze or red Qipao. White symbolizes the purity of love; red indicates the warmth of love. Marriage gauze is based on the western dress without collar, it appears sexy to some extent, and it shows young people are more open. The Qipao is the classic dress for Chinese women, now many foreigners like it very much, too. It combines the elaborate elegance of Chinese tradition with unique elements of style, like the high collar and the attractive slits, which set off the beauty of the female shape. Because of its particular charm, it is like a wonderful flower in the colorful fashion scene. It is made of different materials and varying lengths. In either case, it creates an impression of simple and quiet charm, elegance, and attraction. With distinctive Chinese features Qipao enjoys a growing popularity in the international world of high fashion. With regard to the groom's clothes, they select fine quality famous-brand suit or tuxedo.

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#### CONCLUSION

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Because the marriage and family are social systems, marriage is formed in a long historical evolution of the marriage custom in a nation. During the development of human history, the institution of marriage and family system has experienced different processes of development. In the formation of a family, wedding ceremony as a standardized procedure must be followed. Wedding includes not only wedding, but also the

preparation phase for it and the performance stage after the festivities. It runs through the whole process of life. These customs, as a national symbol and cultural development, play a very important role in ethnic studies and the history of mankind.

The differences existing between Chinese and western wedding custom are hard to avoid. The different religious, cultural origin, marriage concept, and geographies caused different wedding custom in both worlds. These differences will still exist for a long time between Chinese wedding custom and western wedding custom, because it is not easy to change a kind of traditional culture or custom which has remains for thousands of years in our world. While, there are also some similarities with the harmony of culture because of their cultural communication and exchange. Such as the colorful wedding ceremony styles, the comprehensive wedding stresses, some traditional custom that both sides should obey.

Through the comparison of these processes and some related stories, we can easily find the distinctions. Generally speaking, western weddings are more flexible. The processes of a wedding are not so complicated as a Chinese wedding. They give us the impression of romanticism, freedom and equity. According to the traditional Chinese style, it seems to be more cockamamie and striped-pants but own deeper cultural connotations.

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